



Your Strengths Are Also Your Weaknesses

Each one of us is endowed with particular character strengths and weaknesses. Some of these strengths, or [virtues](#), are natural to our personality; others were developed over time, by changing our mindset and cultivating new attitudes and perspectives.

One thing that is often not so obvious is that our strengths can also be the source of our weaknesses. Every virtue is a type of *personal power*, and like all power, it can be misused or distorted. For example, perseverance is a virtue, but sometimes it is not the right response to the situation. It can degenerate into stubbornness and time-wasting.

Similarly, a person can be:

- A high achiever (+), but unable to enjoy the moment (-)
- Highly adaptable (+), but lack structure and consistency (-)
- Empathetic (+), but lack personal boundaries (-)
- Energetic (+), but restless and anxious (-)

In the examples above, the negative sides are not simply unrelated weaknesses. They are *directly related* to the positive side, such as the more one overplays those particular strengths, the more one may experience those negative side-effects. But there is a way out.

In this article, I'll explore six common character strengths, their shadow sides, and how to avoid them. The general principle, you will see, is developing and integrating the opposite quality. In this way, we can have the *best of both worlds*.

Balancing Your Strengths with Complementary Strengths

1. Combining Acceptance with Boldness

“Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage too change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference.”— Saint Francis of Assisi

Acceptance conserves energy and prevents suffering. Being able to accept things as they are is a strength, a virtue. With it we are able to navigate life much more smoothly, with less stress. Other related strengths are **patience**, **resilience**, and [equanimity](#).

However, when the shadow side of this virtue is at play we live in a world of resignation, low motivation, and weak willpower. We may put up with situations that we wouldn't need to put up with if we would take some positive steps to change things. We don't feel empowered to take action, to protect personal boundaries, or to persevere in the face of challenges.

On the other end of the stick, we have the virtue of **boldness**. This is about using your willpower, taking action, and making an effort to change reality. It's related to [courage](#), **leadership**, **tenacity**, and **resourcefulness**.

These more “active” strengths also have their own shadow side when overplayed. They can make you stubbornly persist on the wrong path or the wrong way of doing things. They can be too forceful and damage relationships. They easily create stress, anxiety, and exhaustion.

Each one of us, by nature, is more inclined to be on one end of the stick rather than the other. The exercise is finding which of these two sides you tend to overplay, and then make some effort to develop the complementary strength.

When these strengths are in balance, you can have the power of taking action *together with* the gentleness of acceptance. You pick your battles wisely, put in your best efforts, and accept the results as they come. Rinse and repeat until you are done.

When you find yourself at a crossroad in your life, should you accept or take action? There are times to accept and drop; times to cultivate and change; times to investigate and understand. Only *wisdom*—developed through life experience, self-reflection, study, and meditation—can give you the right direction at any given moment.

2. Combining Optimism with Prudence

"I am prepared for the worst, but hope for the best." — Benjamin Disraeli

Optimism makes us pay more attention to the good things rather than the bad. It nourishes motivation, gratitude, and an attitude of learning. It prevents us from giving in to despair, to engage in negative self-talk, and to lose heart. It's related to the virtue of [trust](#).

The shadow side of optimism is when it degenerates into naiveness, blindness, and denial. This means we are unwilling to look at the negative side of things, or to even consider the possibility of things not going right. The consequences of this can be disastrous.

The virtue on the other side of optimism is **prudence**. It prompts us to be **careful, mindful**, to *pay attention* to things we might be overlooking. It asks us to assess risks, to think of how things could turn out wrong, and what we can do to prevent that.

When prudence is overplayed, it is easy for us to become pessimistic, overly cynical, and even paralyzed by fear.

We can keep all the health and life benefits of optimism without falling into its dark side, if we bring into play the virtue of caution.

Balancing these two strengths means that we look at both good and bad sides of past events, the good and bad results of present actions, and the possibility of good and bad future outcomes. It's about seeing the whole picture, but then choosing to focus on the possibility rather than the fear.

This is a balanced optimism—which is more than hope. It is, as [Martin Seligman](#) puts it, an explanatory style—the way we interpret events in our life.

3. Combining Kindness with Boundaries

“I choose to be kind because it makes me happy. But I will defend my boundaries and my loved ones without hesitation. Make no mistake: I am fierce.”— Unknown

Kindness, and the related virtues of **empathy**, **compassion**, and **consideration**, are core “social virtues”. Kindness invites us to expand our sense of well-being to include others as well. It builds relationships and connection, and it also has its own intrinsic rewards, such as the “helper’s high” (a mix of dopamine and oxytocin).

However, the unbalanced practice of kindness and compassion can cause a lot of trouble, as people may start taking advantage of you. There can also be feelings of helplessness, low self-esteem, and self-loathing. At the very least, it can take lead you to not prioritizing your own well-being and goals, which ultimately leads to burnout and frustration.

The complementary virtue is **self-assertion**, **self-care**, and **setting boundaries**. They are related to a sense of self-respect and self-esteem. It means that you give value to yourself, your goals, your well-being—and that you will take steps to protect and advance those things. Being self-assertive is about being clear and unapologetic about what we want.

When taken to the extreme, self-assertion can degenerate into selfishness, pushiness, manipulation, and narcissism. It closes us down in the little world of our ego, which remains well-protected but isolated and miserable.

Balancing kindness with self-assertion means that we should take care of ourselves *first*, but also make space for the other. It means we are able to build meaningful relationships without being either a bully nor a doormat. It means that we care for ourselves, and strive to care for others as extensions of ourselves.

It also means that when dealing with difficult people, we **hiss but don’t bite**.

4. Combining Discipline with Flexibility

“Those who work the hardest, who subject themselves to the strictest discipline, who give up certain pleasurable things in order to achieve a goal, are usually the happiest.” — B. Hamilton (Olympic Decathlete)

Self-Discipline is one of the core virtues because it enables you to develop any other virtue. It empowers you to stay on track, to keep committed, and to maximize your time and energy for your desired goal. It gives you the structure to achieve anything, and also to transform yourself. Related strengths are **willpower**, **diligence**, **focus**, and **sacrifice**.

The dark side of discipline happens when you become too obsessed, too rigid, too OCD and stubborn. When that happens, goals and processes can often be put first, and people second.

On the opposite side of the scale, we have **flexibility** and **spontaneity**. Here there is a nice openness, fluidity, and a more relaxed feeling.

As to their dark sides, too much flexibility and spontaneity will lead to a lack of continuity, lack of development, unpredictability, and chaos—all in the name of “freedom”. Life may be more pleasant and laid-back, but we will lack the strength, commitment, and work ethic to achieve anything meaningful, be it in our external life or in personal growth.

Finding the balance between these two extremes is very tricky, and varies from person to person. This is something I have personally struggled with, as I was 100% on the side of discipline. (Nowadays I seem to be more balanced about it.)

Perhaps the right way to look at it is to have some areas in our life where we prioritize discipline and consistency (such as in your work and meditation practice), and other areas where flexibility and flow come first (like in family life and relationships). Yet, in all areas, there should be at least a little bit of the other element as well, to make sure we don't go astray.

For example, if you have made the commitment to meditate every morning, then, by all means, follow that no matter what. This is the *never zero* approach I talk about in my [meditation course](#). However, let's have the flexibility to accept that on some days, here and there, things are going crazy and all we may be able to do is to practice for five minutes right before going to bed.

5. Combining Idealism with Pragmatism

“Pure pragmatism can’t imagine a bold future. Pure idealism can’t get anything done. It is the delicate blend of both that drives innovation.” — Simon Sinek.

Idealistic people are moved by their values of how things should be, in an ideal scenario. They strive to put those ideals into practice, and bring reality closer to their utopia. They are driven, optimistic, inspired, and live according to a bigger picture. It is a top-bottom approach to life.

Pragmatic people are focused on how things are and what can be realistically expected of them. They are more process oriented, grounded, and can achieve some types of results quicker. It is a bottom-up approach.

If areas of human knowledge were people, I’d say that *idealism* is art, philosophy, religion. *Pragmatism* is science, economics, sociology. Pragmatism tends to always improve reality; idealism either bends reality or falls on its face.

Being too idealistic can lead to chronic frustration with life and taking refuge in fantasies. Being too pragmatic can be limiting and disorienting.

The balance point seems to be in being driven by idealistic values, having a larger picture and narrative to drive us, but at the same time starting with reality, and being very objective about its limitations.

6. Combining Self-Confidence and Humility

“True humility is not about thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.”— C.S. Lewis

Self-confidence is a strength that allows us to meet life with full power, without shyness or hesitation. It comes from a feeling of self-value, and allows us to be more courageous in the face of adversity and more energetic in meeting challenges.

The dark side of self-confidence is when it becomes delusional or arrogant. This means we are overestimating our abilities, knowledge or qualities—often to the point of being conceited, phony or vain. Life always has its ways to correct that delusion, sooner or later. (For some people the blow needs to be really hard for them to realize...)

A beautiful antidote for an inflated ego are the virtues of **humility**, **modesty**, and **simplicity**. It's about dwelling in the space of “I don't know, maybe”. We become lighter, nimbler. We burn ourselves less. There is more space to learn and self-correct.

Humility shows its dark side when it is concealing feelings of self-denial or lack of self-worth. In this case, the opposite work is needed: to develop self-esteem and self-confidence so that our humility is true and meaningful, and not only an exercise in self-deprecation.

Being self-reliant, self-assured, self-confident on one side, and at the same time humble and simple on the other, is the balance we should aim for.

Integral Development is the Key

Life is rich and complex, and no single strength is enough to help us in all circumstances.

Yet this is often what we try to do—to overlay our natural strengths, rather than developing the complementary strengths. As a result, our strengths sometimes become our weaknesses and blind spots. Unless we address that, all work to continue to increase the overplayed strength will only pour gasoline on the fire.

The key is to find out what are your natural qualities, your natural coping mechanisms, and then see how you can balance them with the opposite qualities. This is integral self-development. It's not easy, but that's the direction that seems to work best.

Many people struggle in their lives without really understanding what is it that it's missing. They feel that if they develop the opposite quality, they will become less themselves. Hopefully, this article helped clear up some of that misconception.

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